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Collecting coins and connecting collectors:
Government and social networks in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (1816-1860)[1]

(Antonino Crisà)

Introduction

This paper outlines the networks of numismatic collectors in Sicily (fig. 1), focusing on government and social interconnections, which a selection of relevant case studies reveals. In particular, we focus on Enrico Pirajno (1809-1864) and Giuseppa Giammone (1832). The period under investigation is the pre-Unification Italian phase, when the region was ruled by the Bourbons (1816-60) and annexed by the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Particularly, this essay benefits from recent research performed at Italian state and private archives, which keep some notable sets of records on this meaningful aspect of antiquarianism, museum studies and archaeological history.

The theme under examination is worth studying for two main reasons. First of all, numismatic collecting in the Bourbon period has been previously analysed through targeted investigations on pre-Unification collections and new, remarkable archival records, but still needs further study to clarify how collectors interacted with each other in terms of coin exchange and as well as the government impact on collecting trends[2]. Second, this paper elucidates for the first time how collecting networks generated and developed at both government and social scales, offering new perspectives on a significant research theme that still waits further inspection through archival surveys.

Historical frameworks

An introductory overview of historical frameworks is crucial to contextualise our research theme in a wider context. We therefore provide informative data on the history of Sicily in the early nineteenth century, the protection of antiquities between 1778 and 1860, the Museum of Palermo and the world of Sicilian coin collectors prior to Italian Unification.

As stated above, our investigation is relevant to the first half of nineteenth century. Sicily was a region of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which was created in December 1816 following the Congress of Vienna and suppressed in February 1861, in parallel with the foundation of the Kingdom of Italy. The Bourbon government ruled over two vast areas, clearly identifiable by the warehouses of Messina: southern Italy ('*Reali Domini al di quà del Faro*') and Sicily ('*Reali Domini al di là del Faro*'). The island was administrated and ruled by a General Lieutenant, who was directly appointed by the Bourbon government in Naples and had specific powers in terms of antiquities safeguarding.

The first king, who founded the kingdom, was Ferdinand III (1816-1825). Subsequently, Ferdinand II (1830-1859) (fig. 2), ruled for a longer period and became famous as the 'Bomb King' ('*Re Bomba*') after he bombed the city of Messina in 1848. Well-known for his strong reactionary internal policy, however, Ferdinand II developed industry, built new infrastructure (e.g. the Napoli-Portici railway) and enhanced museum institutions, like the Museum of Naples. The last king was Francis II (1859-1861), who initially lost Sicily in 1860 after Giuseppe Garibaldi's landing, and southern Italy in 1861, when the Kingdom of Italy was founded[3].

[1] I am grateful to the Royal Numismatic Society, which offered me a generous grant to attend the XV INC.
[2] EQUIZZI 2006; CRISÀ 2012; GUZZETTA 2012; CRISÀ 2014, pp. 1-11.
[3] MACK SMITH 1968, pp. 352-372, 405-444.

Regarding cultural heritage, the Bourbons had already developed a well-organised system of antiquities safeguarding in the second half of eighteenth century. At that time, Sicily comprised three administrative extended areas, called valleys ('*Valli'*), namely Val Demone, Val di Noto and Val di Mazara; this division reflected a more ancient organisation, introduced by the Arabs. On the 1st August 1778 Ferdinand III (1751-1825), ruler of the Kingdom of Sicily, promulgated a decree, which introduced two Royal Keepers of Antiquities ('*Regi Custodi d'Antichità'*) to supervise, protect and eventually restore antiquities in Sicily. The first two custodians – both coin collectors – were Gabriele Lancillotto Castelli, Prince of Torremuzza (1727-1794), who was responsible for Val di Mazara, and Ignazio Paternò Castello, Prince of Biscari (1719-1786), who controlled Val di Noto and Val Demone[4]. The system showed some substantial weaknesses, mainly due to the vastness of areas under control and the lack of coordination among local authorities, which did not properly safeguard provincial antiquities or deal with casual discoveries of finds.

Subsequently, in order to improve executive management of the island, in 1817 the Bourbon government undertook a further administrative reform, creating seven districts in Sicily, called Intendences ('*Intendenze*'). This process was really innovative and founded a modern and well-structured system, which certainly reflects the present division by provinces; in fact, each '*Intendenza*' corresponds to a current province in Sicily (Caltanissetta, Catania, Girgenti/Agrigento, Messina, Palermo and Trapani). The 1817 reform had a decisive impact on antiquities' safeguarding. The Royal Keepers' system, which was not so efficient, as pointed out, was abolished in favour of new measures and tasks to be assigned to a variety of regional and local authorities, which now became involved in safeguarding antiquities.

In 1827 the Bourbon government founded the Commission of Antiquities and Fine Arts ('*Commissione di Antichità e Belle Arti in Sicilia*'). This institution, composed by expert antiquarians and art historians, was responsible for evaluating fine art objects and antiquities (coins, statues, vases, inscriptions, paintings and, more broadly, archaeological ruins and monuments), providing export licences and excavation permissions. One of the most well-known and long-standing presidents was the antiquarian and archaeologist Domenico Lo Faso, Duke of Pietrasanta (1783-1863). Re-established by a Garibaldi's Dictatorial decree in 1860, the Commission was suppressed in 1875[5].

State and private collections

In this multi-faced historical context the Museum of the University of Palermo played a leading role for antiquities' safeguarding and the development of current and future state collections. Once Emanuele Ventimiglia, Prince of Belmonte, donated his considerable collection of paintings to the University in 1814, the institution founded a dedicated museum of art and antiquities, which subsequently gathered substantial sets of thematic collections of archaeological finds (coins, vases, statues, etc.), acquired by archaeological excavations in Sicily and various donations (or sales) by collectors. Notable acquisitions included the coin and medal collection of Tommaso Gandolfo, a rich lawyer of Termini Imerese (Palermo), who sold it to the Museum for 800 ounces in 1820. The Palermo institution, which was strictly connected to the Commission of Antiquities, aimed to 'emulate' the Royal Museum of Naples and contributed to the preservation of Sicilian antiquarian, numismatic and fine art objects. As well as preventing detrimental scattering of finds, one of the methods used to accumulate finds and objects was to offer sets of collections for educational purposes

[4] PAGANO 2001, p. 19; LONGO 2014, pp. 32-36.
[5] CRISÀ 2012, pp. 6-8.

for University students. This plan of action was also pursed by Antonino Salinas (1841-1914), future Director of the Museum in the post-Unification era (1875-1814); the Palermo Museum is currently dedicated to him[6].

In parallel to the development of state collections in Sicily, private collecting had become a remarkable phenomenon since the end of eighteenth century, a period which is, however, outside our chronological framework. Well-esteemed and learned noblemen, such as the Prince of Biscari and the Prince of Torremuzza, who had thorough expertise in antiquarianism and local history studies, started to gather fine art objects, naturalistic items and archaeological finds. They created substantial thematic collections to be stored in their noble palaces and shown to potential visitors, such as 'Grand Tour' travellers or other collectors. For instance, Goethe visited Biscari's and Torremuzza's collections. Coins were greatly appreciated by collectors, especially Greek silver tetradrachms issued by Sicilian mints, such as *Naxos*, *Syracusae*, *Segesta* and *Selinous*. Others were also interested in Roman coins: Gandolfo owned an ample set of Republican silver *denarii* and even possessed many modern medals[7].

Collectors mainly bought coins at local antiquarian markets, which legal or illegal excavations constantly fuelled. They could also find coins by excavating in their properties, if they were at archaeological sites. The discovery of the *Naxos* hoard at Capo Schisò (Giardini Naxos, 1853) generated a sensation and stimulated a fierce hunt among Sicilian collectors to acquire some of the valuable silver tetradrachms found within, which even had been sold in Palermo's antiquarian markets. Giuseppe Grosso Cacopardo (1789-1858), who operated in Messina and finally donated his coin collection to the local municipality, was personally involved in this sequence of events. Furthermore, exchanges represented another cost-effective and advantageous way to obtain new coins and increase private collections, as letters and documents clearly testify[8].

The world of collecting in Bourbon Sicily was therefore complex and variegated. In consequence, it is evident that collecting must be considered on two different levels. The first level is represented by a government dimension, where state authorities were involved and interacted with each other. The second dimension comprised only individual collectors, who not only operated and acted independently, but also generated mutual connections to cultivate their collecting passion and increase their collections. Therefore, well-structured networks embraced both authorities and collectors.

Networks: connecting coin collectors and authorities

Ordinarily a network comprises a set of things/elements or different units, which are connected and interact each other in specific contexts. Interaction can be varied and involve multiple levels of exchanges and relationships. For instance, an individual can be involved in a limited network, which is in turn connected to a wider network[9]. This aspect is clear for Sicilian collectors, where a single individual could write letters to and exchange coins with other island collectors while, at the same time, being in touch with other Italian or even European colleagues. For instance, Torremuzza, who was based in Tusa (Messina), corresponded with the numismatist Joseph Eckhel (1737-1798) who lived in Vienna.

In this regard, Enrico Pirajno (fig. 3), Baron of Mandralisca, represents a meaningful example of a passionate pre-Unification collector, who dynamically acted in a well-connected and dense network. Known as 'Mandralisca', Pirajno lived in Cefalù, where he was appointed local member of the Commission of Antiquities and Fine Arts, dealing with

[6] MOSCATI-DI STEFANO 2006, pp. 15-16; CRISÀ 2012, pp. 10-18.
[7] For the Gandolfo's coin collection catalogue see: CRISÀ 2012, pp. 59-71.
[8] CARROCCIO 2014, pp. 69-70.
[9] KNAPPETT 2011, pp. 37-41, 50-53.

casual discoveries and liaising with regional authorities to safeguard antiquities. Here he generated a sizable collections of Sicilian antiquities, including coins, inscriptions, vases, sculptures – as well as numerous paintings, books and naturalistic objects – coherently arranged and catalogued in his palace. Recent archival research has demonstrated that Pirajno was mainly interested in Sicilian Greek and Roman coins. Lipari, a small island in the Aeolian Archipelago, was the second point of convergence of Pirajno's antiquarian interests through a fortunate coincidence. In fact, his wife owned large properties at Contrada Diana, the area of the ancient necropolis of *Lipara*. Here Pirajno was able to perform excavations, discovering archaeological finds to be stored in his noble palace at Cefalù.

Pirajno was considered the most skilful numismatist of *Lipara* and *Kephaloidion* Sicilian mints, both widely represented in his substantial coin collection. He was even close to completing a thorough monograph on *Lipara*'s numismatics including on innovative metric theories and cataloguing methods. Based on archival records, it can be argued that Pirajno benefitted from constant acquisitions of coins at Sicilian antiquarian markets in Lipari, Cefalù and Tindari, which he often visited. His numismatic expertise was so well-founded, that he was often contacted by eminent Italian and European scholars, who asked him for clarifications or cataloguing advices. For instance, we know that Celestino Cavedoni (1795-1865), the well-known numismatist and archaeologist operating in Modena, asked Pirajno to solve an intricate, interpretative issue regarding a Greek legend on a Roman *Lipara* coin (fig. 4). Pirajno correctly interpreted the legend and professionally verified his supposition analysing a relevant specimen in his collection. Both Pirajno and Cavedoni were often inclined to exchange coins, as letters clearly testify. Other collectors, who bartered coins with Pirajno also through trustworthy couriers, were Antonino Restivo Navarro, living in Castrogiovanni (now Enna), and Giuseppe Grosso Cacopardo[10].

Regarding 'government/state' networks, archival documentation offers outstanding data to reconstruct the episode of Giuseppa Giammone, a coin collector settling in Giarre (Catania), who had discovered more than one hundred ancient numismatic finds 'along a public road' in 1810. Giammone did not report that discovery to the local authorities, who subsequently arrested her for a while, seized the coins and entrusted them to the local '*Segreto'* (mayor). Following this, she sent a plea to the General Lieutenant in Palermo, in order to ask for the restitution of her coins in 1832. However, he asked the Commission of Antiquities to value those coins before any possible return. Finally, the Commission, having ratified their antiquarian and numismatic value, acquired the coins and moved them to the Museum of the Palermo University. Thus, Giammone – willing or not – was involved in a complicate network of authorities and did not get her coins back[11].

Strikingly, the abuse of power that local authorities perpetuated in Bourbon Sicily, has been further documented by recent archival research relevant to Antonio Filippello. A resident of Castiglione (Catania), Filippello found a coin hoard while demolishing one of his house walls in 1818. Arrested by the Bourbon authority, due to a specific order of the '*Prosegreto*' of Castiglione, Filippello was subsequently released and rewarded for the numismatic discovery. Even if Filippello was not (as seems probable) a coin collector, his episode is an exemplar and testifies how private citizens could be involved in state networks on the occasion of casual discoveries (like Giuseppa Giammone)[12].

[10] MASTELLONI 1998, pp. 57-94; CRISÀ 2009, pp. 449-478.
[11] CRISÀ 2012, pp. 27-28.
[12] CRISÀ 2014, pp. 1-11.

Conclusion

It is clear that the world of collectors in early nineteenth-century Sicily can be considered as a complex reality, where individuals operated in local contexts and kept personal connections through letters and coin exchanges to increase their collection through constant acquisitions.

We can now speculate about the aims of founding and expanding 'private' networks (fig. 5). In particular, why did Enrico Pirajno keep his thick network of connections? Undoubtedly, such elaborate, persistent activity boosted Pirajno's network of contacts, increased his collection and raised his reputation among other contemporary antiquarians, numismatists and collectors. Letters, exchanges and sometimes meetings represented the only ways to keep active contacts. Pre-Unification Sicily was quite provincial: antiquarians often complained of the lack of scientific books at booksellers or libraries and sometimes struggled to create associations or 'schools' of experts. Pirajno was a purely self-taught individual and acquired his considerable antiquarian knowledge in the field, studying and excavating autonomously. Those actions were therefore useful to enhance networking and overtake those barriers, providing a dynamic circulation of news, ideas, theories and approaches, which otherwise would have remained little known.

The state and private levels of networks could be sometimes mixed, especially when collectors were involved in legal actions like judicial attachments or detentions by Bourbon authorities, as Giuseppa Giammone's incident proves. Even Pirajno was involved in different networks. For instance, when he acted as member of the Commission, he performed as an 'actor' in a state network. Government collections, however, were not static and 'closed', but they were continuously increased by the authorities, as the episode of Tommaso Del Carretto and Domenico Scinà, re-arranging the Coin Cabinet in the Palermo Museum after the 1822 riots, clearly proves[13].

As stated above and proved by archival data, the history of collecting in Bourbon Sicily markedly conveys the dynamic activity of collectors for two main reasons and demonstrates how multiple, interrelated networks impacted on collecting trends as well. First, collectors gathered substantial numismatic and archaeological finds, which often flowed into the museums, creating a solid, variegated core for the newly-founded post-Unification institutions. We should mention, for example, the collections of Antonino Astuto and Tommaso Gandolfo as well as Robert Fagan (1761-1816), British Consul in Sicily in early nineteenth century. Second, all collectors determined trends and demands at the antiquarian markets, stimulating institutions to acquire specific numismatic sets (such as Sicilian silver tetradrachms) and sometimes neglect others (like Roman Imperial coins).

Finally, networks, which determine elaborate interconnections among Sicilian antiquarians, scholars and collectors, certainly need further in-depth research to reconstruct a more complete outline of people involved in this setting during the Bourbon period. Archives and relevant records can therefore reveal additional data and help obtain a better understanding of networking processes.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1: Map of Sicily.

Fig. 2: Ferdinand II, King of the Two Sicilies (portrait by F. Martorelli, 1844).

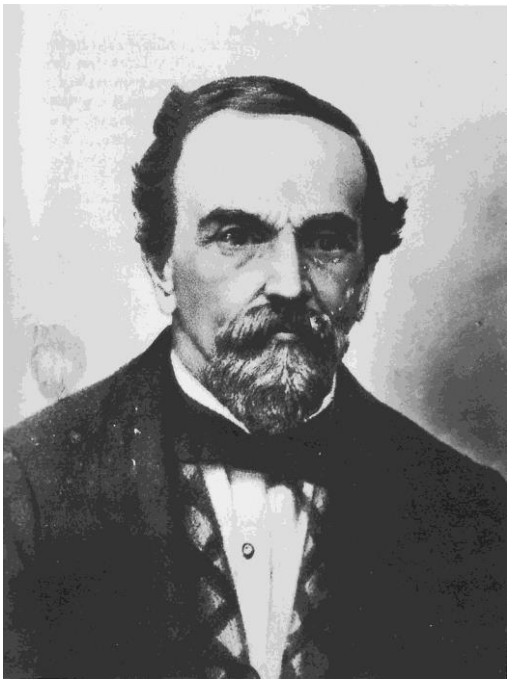

Fig. 3: Enrico Pirajno (1809-64) (CRISÀ 2012, p. 154).

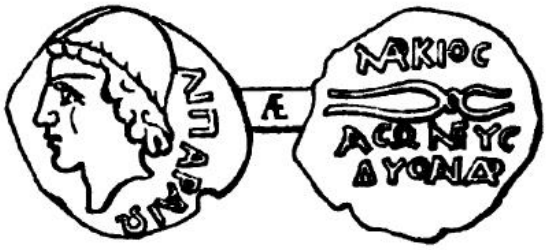

Fig. 4: Roman coin of *Lipara*, correctly analysed by Pirajno (CRISÀ 2009, p. 465).

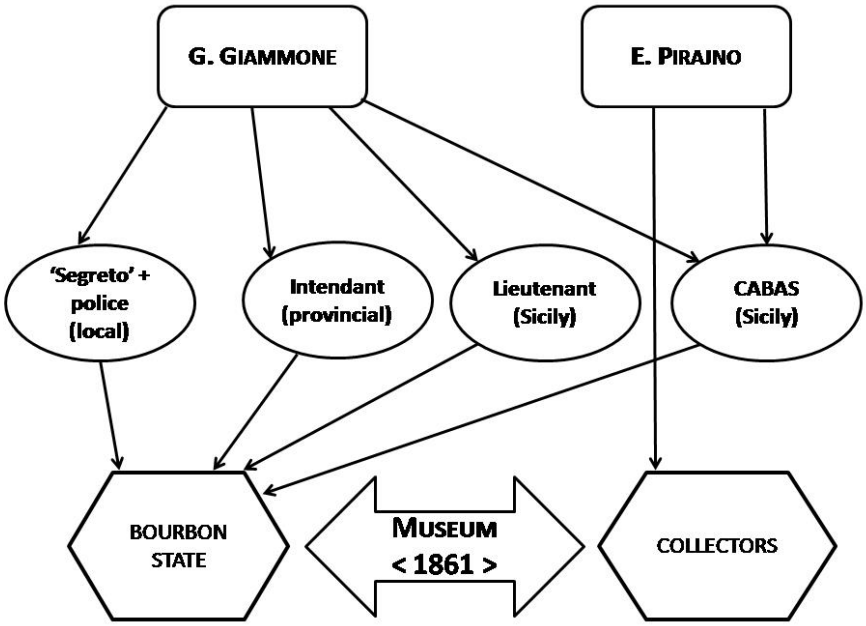

Fig. 5: Scheme showing 'private' and 'government' networks, involving G. Giammone and E. Pirajno (by the author).